

LA SEMENCE

Proposal for a one-hour documentary film

Centre-Sud is the poorest district in Montreal. In spite of outward signs of progress, like the tower of Radio Canada, the Villemarie Expressway, and the gentrification of some streets, 37% of its households earn less than \$10,000 a year, 31.6% of the families are single-parent, and 46% of adults are un-attached--students, old people, homosexuals, itinerants, prostitutes, ex-mental patients, etc. (reference: "Profil d'un Quartier", published by CLSC Centre-Sud, 1989)

At the heart of Centre-Sud, at 1212 rue Panet, is situated le Centre St. Pierre, the community centre of the Oblate fathers. Here is where many of the district's 100 "groupes populaires" have their offices and hold their general meetings.

On the morning of June 13 this year, an extraordinary press conference took place in le Centre St. Pierre. It was the day of Nelson Mandela's visit to Montreal, yet the room was packed with journalists and camera crews from all the city's media listening to two legendary old felquistes announce the formation of a new political group called "Octobre chaud". Its purpose was to ensure that the voice of "les groupes populaires" be heard in the formulation of an independent Quebec. They issued a call to the 500 Québécois arrested under the War Measures Act in 1970 to join them at a national conference to be held at 1212 Panet on October 5.

The two ex-felquistes were Pierre Vallières, author of "Nègres blancs d'Amérique", and Francis Simard, former member of the Chenier cell, for whom this appearance marked his return to the political arena for the first time since his release from prison in 1982.

Was this impressive press conference a temporary sensation, accounted for by the approaching count-down on Meech Lake? Maybe. But there was an element here, not explicitly revealed, which may give it some lasting significance.

There were two other people speaking on behalf of "Octobre chaud", although the press did not pay them much attention. On Vallière's left was a young militant called Louis Saillant, leader of a tenants' rights group called FRAPRU. On Simard's right was a completely unknown young woman called Nadya Ladouceur, a student of "psycho-sociologie de la communication" at l'UQAM, and an activist in the Mouvement de Etudiants Chrétiens du Québec (MECQ). Nadya is the daughter of a waitress in Point St. Charles, and of a father she only sees when he is not doing time for petty theft. She is 20 years old, and supports herself by working nights in a depanneur on Rachel Street. She joined MECQ because she found its agenda to be revolutionary without being dogmatic, and spiritual without being heirarchical.

Standing at the back of the hall during that press conference was Jean Robitaille, one of the leading lights of MECQ for 10 years. He is the son of the former publicity director of le Nouveau Journal and La Presse. He remembers

learning his first political lesson at the age of eight. It was in October, 1970, when his father invited him to watch from his office window as the Canadian Army took up positions at the corner of Peel and Sherbrooke streets. In high school in Laval he was a founding member of le Front de Libération des Etudiants Opprimés ("FLEO"). At CEGEP, he checked out the Marxist-Leninist League, and found it too dogmatic and structured, while in MECQ he found a genuine sense of shared questioning and growth in political analysis and action. Today he is co-editor of *Vie Ouvrière*, perhaps the most polished and imaginative journal of the left in Quebec. It is published out of le Centre St. Pierre, and as its masthead proclaims, "s'inspire principalement du courant chrétien libérateur."

The other co-editor of *Vie Ouvrière* is Pierre Vallières. After 20 relentless years of biting critical analysis of the federalist-capitalist establishment, both in the press and on the platform, he was hard hit by the loss of the referendum in 1980, and didn't recover as a political activist until he discovered the "theology of liberation" in 1984. The theology of liberation was inspired by Father Camilo Torres' famous call for "the seizure of power for the people" from his guerilla headquarters in the mountains of Colombia in 1966. Since then, it has played a major role in igniting movements of social change throughout Latin America.

Vie Ouvrière is published in collaboration with la Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétien, le Mouvement de Travailleurs Chrétiens, and le Centre de Pastorale en Milieu Ouvrier. The

CPMO was established in 1970 "pour développer des noyaux d'Eglise dans une perspective de transformation de la société." One of its leaders, Jean Ménard, also attended that June 13 press conference.

Jean Ménard, 62 years old, is a "PME"--Prêtre des Missions Etrangères. Quebec has 5,000 missionaries abroad. PME is one of the few missionary orders whose members have a choice of where they are to go. Jean Ménard had himself assigned to Cuba soon after Castro came to power, and stayed there for the first three years of the Cuban revolution, 1959-62. He then had himself assigned to Chile, where he worked with MIR, one of the groups behind the rise to power of Salvador Allende. At Allende's fall in 1973, he was invited by Michel Chartrand to settle back in Montreal and to help the CSN to set up le Centre Internationale de Solidarité Ouvrière. From 1980 to 1982, he participated in the excitement of the first two years of the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, where one priest, Ernesto Cardenal, was Minister of Culture, and another, Miguel d'Escoto, was Foreign Minister.

He has been with CPMO since then, travelling around Quebec to give workshops in church basements on "le néo-libéralisme et l'appauvrissement planifié", and "le nationalisme et la crise constitutionnelle". He has also helped to establish a series of "communautés de base" around the province, based on the Latin American model--groups of Christians who want to study the political meaning of the New

Testament and to develop strategies for taking action in their communities.

Jean Menard, Jean Robitaille, Nadya Ladouceur and Pierre Vallières are now in the process of setting up one of these "communautés de base" in Montreal Centre-Sud, along with twelve of their Christian activist collaborators. They have just finished moving into four communal apartments within walking distance of one another, and will start holding regular Monday night supper meetings in September.

Francis Simard is a kind of "honorary member". He is the only one in the group with children, and lives with them and his wife Denise in a cabin in la Mauricie, one hour's drive from Montreal. He is also the group's only "non-croyant", although he was married in a church, and had his children baptised.

So here is an opportunity to make a film of passion and discovery about how the Quebec of tomorrow is being viewed from "en-bas". By recording the lives of Jean M., Jean R., Pierre, Francis and Nadya for two weeks this fall, as they try to re-define their roles in post-Meech Québec, we will be able to get an insight into the formation of what may become a significant new popular movement in the Quebec of the nineties.

Shooting outline

1. Monday, September 24 -- Weekly supper meeting of the new "communauté de base" at 1814 rue Champlain, just around the corner from Telemetropole, and under the shadow of the Jacques Cartier bridge. It is the apartment that Jean Menard shares with another PME, Claude Lacaille, and three young MECQ activists--Michel, Julie and Sylvie.

Over a buffet of various salad mixtures, with a special serving of peanut butter for Jean M, and wine for all, they are sparring over a possible name for the group. Some like the fighting sound of "communauté de resistance". Others argue for something with a more positive ring to it, like "l'évangile dans le traffic".

Special guest for this meeting is Myreille Audet, invited by the group to give them a historic profile of Centre-Sud. For three years, she has been the driving force of Alerte Centre-Sud, a coalition of 30 community groups active in welfare rights, tenants' rights, zone planning, and commercial development. She has always been suspicious of religious faith, but she is an old friend of Jean Robitaille from their student days. In 1982, they had founded RAJ together (le Rassemblement Autonomous des Jeunes) to fight for equal rights for welfare recipients under 30, and had organized sit-ins and hunger strikes for that purpose. So she tells the group what they want to know:

Depuis qu'il s'est développé lors de la deuxième moitié du 19ième siècle, le Centre-sud a toujours constitué un lieu privilégié de militance. Les communistes y ont laissé leur marque dans les années 20, 30 et 40. Les rinistes, felquistes et pequistes s'y sont illustrés dans les années 60 et 70. Les comités de citoyens, clinique populaires et groupes ML également, du moins jusqu'en 1982, année de grande récession. Depuis le milieu des années 80, ce sont les groupes populaires qui poursuivent la lutte. Ce n'étaient que les intellectuels qui étaient découragés par la défaite du référendum.

Then she tells the group that she'd like to know why they decided to establish a "communauté de base" in Centre-Sud. "Do you expect to convert us? Is the church trying to extend its influence?" Pierre replies:

L'Eglise monarchie est le contraire de ce que Jésus souhaitait. Religion, c'est le comportement infantile de soumission et l'idéologie sacrée de l'oppression. Il faut passer à l'Evangile, qui est proclamation de la libération, de l'amour, de l'égalité entre tous les hommes et femmes, de la préférence pour les plus marginalisés... Comme l'a dit Camilo Torres, "le devoir de tous les chrétiens est d'être révolutionnaire!"

2. September 25 -- Establishing shots of Centre-Sud.

3. September 26 -- "Chez Emilie", a small community centre in one corner of the immense grey-stone mother-house of les Soeurs de la Providence, at the corner of blvd Maisonneuve and rue Fullum. Radio-Québec is just around the corner, and the 13 blue-walled stories of the QPP headquarters are just up the street. The founder of les Soeurs de la Providence, Emilie Gamelin, 1800-51, was popularly known as "l'ange des prisonniers politiques", for the work she did with the imprisoned patriots of 1837.

"Chez Emilie" is a kitchen-dining room where groups of welfare mothers operate one of Centre-Sud's nine "cuisines collectifs". The sisters provide day-care for the mothers while they cook their shared, budget-trimmed meals for their families for the week ahead. Wednesday mornings are set aside for "bouffes rencontres" with guest speakers.

The guest today is Jean Ménard, invited to speak on the question, "L'indépendance, au profit de qui?" He is introduced by sister Lise Gagnon, who happens to be president of Alerte Centre-Sud, Myreille Audet's coalition of community groups. Sister Lise is as suspicious of power-hungry males as Myreille is of catholics. Jean says:

Faites attention à la commission parlementaire de Bourassa et Parizeau. Elle sera entre les mains de l'élite politique et économique et ne répondra pas nécessairement aux besoins de la majorité des Québécois. Si nous voulons nous assurer d'une société où régnera la justice et la dignité, nous devons essayer de tenir des états généraux locaux où les chômeurs, les monoparentaux, les jeunes et les vieux peuvent se faire entendre.

4. September 27 -- a small house on rue Ste. Christophe, just up the street from Dupuis Frères, and around the corner from l'UQAM and the Voyageur Bus Terminal. It is one of the homes of les Soeurs Auxiliatrices. Three of them are meeting with Jean Robitaille and Francis Simard, around a table big enough to fill the modest-sized dining room. Country-western music is drifting in from the kitchen.

Sister Gisèle Ampelman is a social worker who organizes welfare mothers. Sister Suzanne Loiselle works at l'Entraide Missionnaire, which briefs missionaries on their countries of

destination. Sister Clotilde Lemay is the group's administrator, and is active in the Coalition Romero, a Montreal group named after the Bishop of El Salvador who was assassinated in 1980. The Coalition is planning for the visit to Montreal next week of one of the outstanding leaders of the theology of liberation, Bishop Dom Pedro Casaldaleja of Brazil. He narrowly escaped assassination two years ago for encouraging the spread of a new movement of resistance against the violent land-owner class--a people's movement rooted in the church's "communautés de base". He has been admonished by the Vatican for his activities.

Jean Robitaille is also active in the Coalition Romero. He and Simard have come to ask Clotilde if Dom Casaldeja could speak at the ^{October} ~~Coalition~~ chaud conference next week. Clotilde thinks it is possible, as long as he is not expected to participate in the "hommage au Manifeste du FLQ", which is on the programme. That might cause a diplomatic stir between Ottawa and Brasilia.

Sister Suzanne produces a paper she wrote as a graduate student at the Universite de Montreal in 1971, entitled "Le projet de Libération". She explains it to Francis:

C'était une reflexion sur le Manifeste du FLQ, une recherche sur le sens et les implications du projet révolutionnaire et sur les choix possibles du chrétien d'ici dans le processus de libération du Quebec. J'ai fait appel au Message de la Fete du Travail 1970 des eveques canadiens. J'ai précisé ses ressemblances et ses différences avec le Manifeste du FLQ. Je ne suis pas sûr si mon professeur l'a bien apprécié.

5. September 28 -- An old school building on 9th Avenue in Rosemount. Headquartrers of le Front Commun des Personnes Assistés Sociales. Nadya Ladouceur has come to participate in a workshop on Bill 37, the Bill which cut the monthly payments of 70,000 of Quebec's welfare recipients as of August 1, and laid severe restrictions on payments to the other 487,000.

The workshop is being conducted by Gisèle Ampelman, the Auxiliatrice sister. She uses the game of bingo as metaphor in her analysis of the causes of poverty, the political and economic forces at work in the welfare system, and the ways to beat it. Nadya talks of her life as a child in a single-parent family in Point St. Charles.

Gisèle invites the single mothers in the group to sign up for a trip to Peru being organized for November by the Montreal coalition of cuisines collectifs. They will be meeting with a similar coalition in Peru which has had some success in getting government support. The trip will be financed partly by sales of cakes and sweaters, and partly by the Conférence des Religieuses Canadiennes section Québec (CRCQ). Gisele led a similar expedition to Brazil two years ago.

6. Saturday, September 29 -- The woods near Ste. Ursule, Mauricie. Francis Simard is introducing the "communauté de resistance" to the art of hare-hunting, and later, in his tool shed, to the art of wine-making.

7. Monday, October 1 -- Michel and Simone Chartrand are guests at the weekly meeting of the communauté on rue Champlain. They talk of the beginnings of their romance at meetings of Action Catholique in the 1940s. They share memories with Jean Ménard about the Allende years and the setting up of le Centre Internationale de Solidarité Ouvrière. One member of the group is especially fascinated--Cecilia Protz, a social worker with delinquent kids, who escaped from Pinochet's Chile three years ago.

8. October 2 -- Office of the Archbishop of Quebec, in the Cathedral of Québec. Dom Pedro Casaldaleja is there at the invitation of Mgr. Maurice Couture, the new primate of Canada. Perre Vallières has come to interview them for Vie Ouvrière. Casaldaleja:

Le capitalisme a interet a contester une église qui s'incarne dans la lutte des peuples et leur libération....Mais l'Eglise du Premier monde devrait être évangeliquement plus scandaleuse que l'Eglise du Tiers monde, pour constester au capitalisme ses sources, ses racines, ses centres principaux de pouvoir, et pour faire percevoir au Premier monde les injustices à l'intérieur de sa propre maison.

Couture:

Je vois une Eglise dépouillée, une Eglise forcément devenu pauvre et, par le même, plus crédible dans son message évangélique. C'est mon rêve....Mais nous sommes encore embarrassés par nos richesses.

9. October 3 -- A room at l'Entraide Missionnaire, beside parc Jarry, where the Pope said mass four years ago. This is a meeting of the Comité des Priorités de Dons of the CRCQ. Sisters call it their "Club des riches", because it dispenses

\$1 million a year. Gisele Ampelman is leaving the room, having made her appeal for the Peru trip.

Enter Myreille Audet, who makes an appeal for a donation to "La Criée", the journal of Alerte Centre-Sud.

Si vous nous donniez le même montant que vous offrez à Vie Ouvrière, nous pourrions faire un plus beau journal et augmenter notre tirage. Cette année nous devons concentrer nos pressions sur la ville de Montréal pour qu'elle inclue un bon nombre d'habitations à loyer modique dans le Faubourg Québec, un plan de développement de 2000 unités d'habitations que la ville prévoit dans le quartier compris entre la gare Viger et la brasserie Molson.

One of the members of the comité is sympathetic.

Claude Hardy, a Capucin father who runs le Carrefour Familial Hochelaga on Ontario Street east, where there is also a severe shortage of public housing.

L'un de nos tâches, c'est de libérer les gens de la religion, pour qu'ils puissent retrouver leur foi.... La piété de frère André n'a pas fait grand chose pour libérer les gens de leur misères sociales. C'est dans le combat qu'on vit vraiment la mystique de liberté. Nous sommes avec vous.

10. October 4 -- La Boustifaille, rue Panet. A community restaurant for the unemployed. Francis, Jean R. and Nadya are having lunch with Siggi Schefke, one of the leaders of the New Forum in east Berlin--the group which started the uprising against the east German regime last fall, and which then got defeated by Kohl's Christian Democrats in the national elections that were held after the wall came down. Schefke is in Montréal to speak to the "Octobre chaud" conference tomorrow. The four of them talk with passion about the collapse of the communist regimes in eastern Europe, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua,

the conservatism of the Christian Democratic parties in Germany and Chile, the chances for socialism in Quebec.

11. October 5 -- The Grand Salle at le Centre St. Pierre is packed to hear a debate between Siggi Schefke, Paul Rose of FLQ fame, Andree Ferretti of RIN fame, and Dom Casaldaleja. Vallieres is in the chair, and makes the opening remarks:

Faut-il dire adieu a la révolution? Suite a l'apparent triomphe du capitalisme, comment batir un projet de société qui tienne compte a la fois des aspirations égalitaires, de la nécessité de l'indépendance nationale, des droits des autochtones, de mouvement des femmes, et des tres urgentes questions d'ordre écologique?

12. Saturday, October 6 -- pick-up shots

13. Monday, October 8 -- La "communauté de resistance" meets to evaluate. Francis:

Après avoir entendu Casaldaleja, je crois que les "communautés de base" representent le futur. Après l'isolation des années 80, il faut re-construire le "nous". Il y a 650,000 pauvres ici a Montreal. Ou est-ce qu'on peut aller sur le bien-être social? C'est toujours le même trajet de dépendence, de limitations, de l'isolation. On peut construire un mouvement de liberté, de fraternité avec ces gens-la.

Jean M:

Jesus a dit, "je suis venu pour que vous puissiez vivre dans l`abondance". Il y a deux types de chrétiens-- ceux qui s'occupe de la religion, et ceux qui lutte pour "le royaume" prevu par Jesus.

Pierre:

Le nationalisme tout seul ne rempli pas le vide idéologique.

Nadya:

Nous sommes la sémence d'un nouveau mouvement.

Jean R.:

La récolte est à voir.